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CHILDREN, LIBRARIES AND THE LOVE OF READING

BY ANNIE CARROLL MOORE,

Supervisor of Work with Children, The New York Public Library.

“Does John really read this book?”

The children's librarian looked up, from the copy of *Masterman Ready* she was stamping, into the smiling face of John's grandmother who had stopped at the library on her way to market and now stood waiting with market basket on her arm for John's book and card. The grandmother replied:

Oh, dear yes, he reads it over and over. John says *Masterman Ready's* the nicest book ever was. He's peculiar is John—he doesn't like many things nor folks—they mostly don't understand him but he's got a nice heart. Another thing about John is that everything he takes an interest in seems real—just as if it had happened today or yesterday. I found him crying one day and at first couldn't get him to tell what was the matter. Bye and bye he said he was crying because he felt so awful bad about Abel's getting killed. They had had the story of Cain and Abel in the Sunday School lesson and I don't think most of the children did more than forget but to Johnnie it was just as if it had happened yesterday to one of his mates. You might not know it from the looks of him nor from anything he says, but if anybody's been good to John he never forgets it. He feels comfortable in this children's library for he says nobody bothers him. He isn't quick about reading but he's very persistent when he takes a fancy. He took a real fancy to *Masterman Ready* and so he keeps at it and reads it over and over until he gets all the sense.

I learned to read in a queer way myself. I never went to school and after I came to America—I was then twelve years old—I had to work pretty hard. When I grew to be a big girl I used to read aloud to some blind folks who lived in the block. Two of them were educated and told me how to pronounce the words. I used to get the books from the New York Free Circulating Library and I feel as if that library gave me an education. When I moved to Brooklyn to live the first question I asked was if there was a library and I felt so glad the children could enjoy right away a privilege that has meant so much to me and their mother. Free libraries and free baths are the greatest benefits of our time.

The children's librarian had wondered at the fascination of *Masterman Ready* for a little German boy of ten years unable to read with ease. She had vainly tried to interest him in something easier until he should have gained facility in reading. Always without success. John persistently chose *Masterman Ready* when-

ever it was to be found on the shelves. If *Masterman Ready* was not to be had he would leave his card, often for weeks at a time. On his return he would fall upon *Masterman Ready* and at the end of two weeks ask to have the book renewed. This had gone on for more than a year before his grandmother came.

It is nearly twenty years since this interview with John's grandmother took place in the children's room of the Pratt Institute Free Library but it loses none of its reality when applied to the work of the children's librarian of today for it sums up the whole philosophy of her training in the voluntary use of books with children: Freedom in the choice of good books; respect for the reader's individual taste; active recollection of one's own childhood.

RECENT DEVELOPMENT OF LIBRARY WORK WITH CHILDREN

Library work with children has been widely extended and developed in America during the past twenty years and just before the war it was passing rapidly to European countries as "a new idea in education" through photographic representations and through the writings of educators and journalists from Norway, Sweden, France, Russia, Germany, Holland, Italy, Spain, China and Japan. The late Herman Bang, the Danish author, who visited this country in 1912 said of children's libraries:

This library work for children is amazing. I was prepared for everything else I have seen in America but this surprises and delights me, I find it deeply interesting and full of possibilities for future generations. I should like to spend a long time in this beautiful room reading and watching the children.

Dr. Crothers in 1904 wrote:

What an interesting place to study the tastes of children, your library must be. I have been delighted to see the way in which my two little girls insist on the books they enjoy, resisting all attempts at substitution. Twelve year old Margery (to whom *Miss Muffet's Christmas Party* is dedicated) insists on romance while her sturdy matter of fact sister has been perfectly content since I introduced her to Rollo. She takes it with all the seriousness for which it was intended.

To put one's self in touch with the individual reader at home, in school, or in the library requires time and an active imagination but is vastly more profitable than to interpose one's own judgment in the selection of a book for a child. I believe it to be essential to the development of library work for children on a large scale. A genuine love of reading cannot be forced nor should we fail to recog-

nize that the mechanics of learning to read present grave difficulties to minds in which the love of "mental adventure" and appreciation of art forms may already exist in a high stage of development.

One of the most remarkable children I have ever known, a little Scotch boy, was seemingly incapable of learning to read at school although he had an unusual command of language, was familiar with the great characters of legend and history, and possessed of a rich fund of general information. Through his interest in pictures he finally mastered the mechanics of reading at the library, quite unconsciously, as is the experience of many a child. The first book he read was *The House that Jack Built* with the Caldecott illustrations. He announced triumphantly "Now I can read what is under the pictures in the history books." Pictures had more interest and meaning for him than words.

Boutet de Monvel's *Joan of Arc*, familiarly called "the book about the French girl," completely fascinated him. His delight at discovering for himself that learning to read gave him the ability to read the legends under the pictures in the histories, books of travel and books about animals left a vivid recollection—a recollection so strong as to have influenced my entire field of library work with young or foreign born children by an enlarged use of picture books. The books illustrated by Randolph Caldecott, Kate Greenaway, Boutet de Monvel, Leslie Brooke and other artists have been used as first steps in training in the appreciation of art, to stimulate language interest, and as an introduction to the life of other countries.

A solid page of printed words remained an appalling experience to Jimmy and he turned from it with weariness to the person who would "tell things." Sometime after the death of this little boy his younger sister listening to stories of Alfred the Great, whose Millenary was being observed in the children's room, remarked "King Alfred puts me in mind of Jimmy, the way he went about learning things off folks." Every teacher or librarian will recall children whose interest in reading it seemed impossible to rouse and other children whose reading is so far in advance of the grade requirements as to yield daily surprises—children who read so fast as to hold no impressions of what they have read.

TESTING THE CHILD'S INTERESTS AND TASTES

More and more is the modern public library becoming the testing place for the reality of interests created in the school and the home. Less dependence is placed upon graded lists as parents, teachers and librarians come into closer human relationships and a better understanding of the needs, the resources, and their common aim—to foster the love of reading for its own sake. Whether the first persistent fancy for a book is for *Mother Goose*, with or without Caldecott's illustrations, for *Peter Rabbit* or a *Brownie Book*, the *Blue Fairy Book*, *Treasure Island* or *Masterman Ready* is of small consequence. The matter of supreme importance is that a spontaneous desire to read something be aroused and that the reader, whatever his age, and wherever he may live, be left free to enjoy to the full his first fine joy in the discovery of a book to which he feels related.

Only a few books make their own direct appeal to one generation of child readers after another—

The Bible	Rip Van Winkle
Aesop's Fables	Little Women
Mother Goose	St. Nicholas (bound volumes)
The Arabian Nights	The Children's Book; (a collection of the best and most famous stories and poems in the English language chosen by Horace E. Scudder.)
Robinson Crusoe	
Grimm's Fairy Tales	
Swiss Family Robinson	
The Blue Fairy Book	

Experience in the voluntary use of library books by children will vary greatly even in the same city. It is my own experience that, given the opportunity, children of the elementary schools read above and beyond the supposed average.

CONSTRUCTIVE SUGGESTIONS

How then may we hope to create and sustain such interests in reading as will make the free use of books in libraries a more significant factor in the American life of today? Ten years of active supervision of the children's rooms in a system of branch libraries presenting great variety and range of experience, from the small rural community to the richly oriented life of the East Side, has led to these conclusions regarding the needs:

(1) SELECTION AND SUPPLY OF BOOKS

There should be an inviting selection of books in good editions familiarly known and constantly re-read and discussed by those who are seeing the daily use of them by children and their parents. There should be generous duplication of the most desirable titles that a child may not have to wait months or years to read the book his friend is reading. Companionship in reading is an incalculable stimulus to the love of reading. There should be sufficient variety in the selection of titles to appeal to great diversity of taste in reading.

(2) THE LIBRARY AND READING ROOM ENVIRONMENT

Books should be placed in a setting which invites reading. The furnishing and decoration of the room, the presence of growing plants and flowers help to give this atmosphere but it is primarily induced by the presence of books which do not circulate and which require some introduction if they are to be very generally read. The reading room collection should include *The Odyssey*, *The Iliad*, Shakespeare, *Don Quixote*, the Norse Sagas, the Greek Myths, the *Nibelungenlied*, the Arthurian Legends, *Pilgrim's Progress*, Gulliver, Hans Andersen, Lewis Carroll, Howard Pyle, the English and Scottish ballads, Scott, Fenimore Cooper, Dickens, Stevenson, Kipling, Mark Twain, the collections of poetry and fairy tales chosen by Kate Douglas Wiggin and Nora Smith; the folk tales of Joseph Jacobs and the fairy books of Andrew Lang.

Reference books for children should be chosen from the simplest and most up-to-date of the books for adults. Boys and girls may become familiar at an early age with the resources of dictionaries, encyclopedias, atlases and books dealing with literary, scientific or mechanical subjects. Pictures to supplement books and a variety of illustrations in books should be used freely in reference work with children. Reading and reference collections numbering from 200 to 4,000 volumes have proved as suggestive to parents, teachers and librarians as to the children who are learning the resources of a library.

(3) INTRODUCTION TO BOOKS

Skillful introduction to books may take the form of story telling, leading to the reading of folk and fairy tales, poetry, stories of adventure by land or sea, history stories or stories from the great national epics and dramas.

Books may be so arranged in libraries as to invite attention to a special subject by their own direct appeal. This method is growing in popularity and is aided by lists in which the books are allowed to speak for themselves by yielding direct quotations in relation to such subjects as heroism, vacation stories, songs and plays, Christmas, the Shakespearian festival.

Talks about books may be given by librarians, in schools or in libraries to visiting classes of school children. The use of a library by groups or classes may be made equally profitable to school or library but it will never take the place of voluntary use by the individual boy or girl who comes for his own enjoyment. Each form of contact with the library, the group or the individual, affects the other to the degree that spontaneous pleasure and interest in reading is aroused in librarians, children and teachers. Systematic group work with visiting classes from public schools in New York was established six years ago and the results are now to be clearly seen in the extent and variety of reference work in the children's room. "How much more alive to books the children are becoming every day," is the recent comment of a sister in a parochial school.

(4) COMMUNITY NEEDS

The library should be able to interpret and respond to the needs and interests of the community in which it is placed. No fixed limitation can be placed upon its service. Community movements such as the Shakesperian tercentenary present ideal opportunities for making books live again to large groups of children. It has been impossible in many public libraries this year to supply the demand for Shakespeare's plays and for books relating to the period in which he lived.

To such good purpose did the teachers and pupils of two school districts in New York put their minds to the life and times of Shakespeare that in the gymnasium of an East Side school there were re-created pictures of Warwickshire, a model of the Globe Theatre and another of Ann Hathaway's cottage and garden. This festival was unique in its beauty and spontaneity and in its effect upon the reading interests of 1,500 children who took part in the songs, dances, games and drama of the Elizabethan period.

A striking contrast is presented by the reference problem of the boy who had been assigned as a composition subject "Shakespeare's

children." After looking at many books and at the Shakespeare exhibit he said: "I have looked everywhere for Shakespeare's children. All I find is their names, Susanna, Judith and Hamnet. Two were twins. They were all baptized and I can't find out when they died. What good is that to write about?"

"These visits to the library are becoming as instructive to us teachers as to the children. We are learning a great deal," was the comment of one of the men teachers during this period of preparation. It is manifest as never before, that librarians and teachers must know and share the interests of the age in which they are doing this work. If reading is to mean anything—if creative work for children is to follow this war as it followed the revolutions in France, England and America, there must be an understanding of the potential reader and of what now exists for him in books.

There is need for informing and enlivening lectures and discussions of children's interests in books as well as of books for children if we are to see any wide practice of that skill in the introduction of books which is born of the play of fine minds upon the period of childhood and youth in literature and in real life. It is the reality of child life and experience and the reality of literature for its own sake that we seek to preserve from one generation to another. Not lists of books to be read but the fusion of the readers' reactions to the books they are reading will form the background for what the European educators have called "this new idea in education"—the children's library.